



A Confederation of the Salish,
Pend d' Oreilles
and Kootenai Tribes

THE CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES
OF THE FLATHEAD NATION

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A People of Vision

Montana State House of Representatives
House Agriculture Committee
Hon. Lee Randall, Chairman
63rd Montana State Legislature
Capital Building
Helena, Montana

TRIBAL COUNCIL MEMBERS:

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Carole Lankford - Vice Chair
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March 21, 2013

RE: House Bill No. 610 "Generally Revise Management of Wild Buffalo and Wild Bison"

Chairman Randall and Committee Members:

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes ("CSKT" or "Tribes") strongly oppose the passage of HB 610, a bill that would significantly alter the status and management of Yellowstone Bison in Montana. Passage of HB 610 would virtually remove the wild bison from their migratory homelands in Montana and would end a multi-government effort to return wild bison to their rightful place in the Montana ecosystem.

Our interest in this bill stems from the CSKT's unique status. When we signed the Hellgate Treaty in 1855 (12 Stat. 975), the Tribes reserved the right to hunt and fish in usual and accustomed places in our aboriginal territory—a right that includes hunting buffalo in the Greater Yellowstone Area. Our tribal members have a long history of hunting buffalo, and we continue to rely on them to sustain us physically and spiritually. Passage of HB 610 would significantly hinder our ability to keep the buffalo as part of our diet and culture, and it would destroy our hope of seeing the last remaining wild buffalo herd play a role in the lives of CSKT members for generations yet to come.

The CSKT have great concerns regarding the proposed definition of wild bison under HB 610. It limits the ability to expand bison habitat through adaptive management under the IBMP by restricting wild bison to lands that are contiguous with the border of Yellowstone National Park. This bill would also eliminate the opportunity for disease-free bison to be restored as wildlife in other parts of Montana, which is something that the Tribes have long supported. It is clear that the intent of this bill is to eliminate wild, free roaming bison from the Montana landscape, thwarting years of intergovernmental work, as well as directly impacting the CSKT treaty reserved bison hunt.

If HB 610 were enacted into law, it would end the intergovernmental partnership that has developed between the Tribes and the State, and it would very likely result in lengthy and expensive litigation over the future of bison in Montana. We value the relationship that has been forged between the treaty-hunt tribes and the State of Montana. Our bison management goals have been based on a mutual commitment to a biologically sustainable hunt and a desire to see bison respected as a valued game species. We participate in yearly tribal-state intergovernmental hunt management meetings focused on coordinating bison harvest, hunter safety, regulatory enforcement, and the long-term viability of the herd.

The CSKT are also a full partner in the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP). Although not without its limitations, the IBMP has been successful in fulfilling its twin goals of increased bison tolerance in Montana and maintenance of the state's brucellosis-free status. Bison management is undoubtedly a complex issue, but it is important to note that there has never been a documented bison-to-cattle transmission of brucellosis while the IBMP has been in place. Moreover, as long as the elk population of the Greater Yellowstone Area carries the disease, brucellosis will remain in that environment. With the recent modifications to federal regulation, the threat of Montana losing its brucellosis-free status has been greatly reduced.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are prepared to continue our treaty hunt, as well as our good working relationship with the State of Montana, and hope to continue co-managing this public resource for the good of both tribal and state citizens. The Tribes respectfully urge this committee to vote NO on House Bill No. 610.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Joe Durglo", written in a cursive style.

Joe Durglo, Chairman
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council